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CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND MOTIVATION

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The present investigation focused on possible cultural influences on religious experience and religious motivation among 165 Orthodox Israeli Jews from Ashkenazi, Sephardic and Ethiopian cultural backgrounds. Discriminant function analysis was performed on measures of introverted, extroverted and interpretive religious experience as measured by the M-Scale (Hood 1975) and measures of religious motivation as measured by the MRBQ (Lazar, Kravetz, and Frederick-Kedem 2002). This analysis showed that a combination of experience and motivation measures —interpretive religious experience coupled with non-family based religious motivations —distinguished between these groups belonging to the same religion but coming from different cultural backgrounds, thus providing support for cultural influence on these religious variables.

In his survey of empirical approaches to the psychology of religion, Spilka (2001) divides the empirical assessment of religious content into four major fields: religious behavior, religious beliefs and attitudes, religious knowledge, and religious experience. Regarding the latter, Spilka states that the complexities of religious experience are especially intriguing to the psychologist of religion and that theoretical speculation in this field has drawn upon most of the major fields of psychology such as social, developmental, and clinical psychology as well as the areas of psychoanalysis, motivation, and cognition.

Religious experience has been a subject of psychological research for more than a century. Since James' (1902) classic psychological analysis of religious experience, researchers have performed surveys of the incidence, duration, and intensity of religious experience (e.g. Hardy 1979; Hay 1982), have investigated the triggers of religious experiences (e.g., Greeley 1975; Hills and Argyle 1998), and have studied the implications of these experiences upon psychosocial well-being (e.g. Spilka, Brown, and Cassidy 1992). A number of studies dealt with the measurement of religious or mystical experiences (e.g., Hood 1970; 1975). However, relatively few empirical investigations have examined possible cultural influences on the patterning of religious experience (Spilka et al. 1996).

Some investigations indicate that there is a trans-cultural common core of religious experience. For example, Hood, Morris, and Watson (1993) uncovered a three-factor structure for the Mysticism Scale (M-Scale) (Hood 1975). This structure has been confirmed in recent investigations on culturally dissimilar samples such as Americans and Iranians (Hood et al. 2001) and Orthodox Israeli Jews (Lazar and Kravetz forthcoming). However, although the structure of religious or mystical experience may not differ between various cultures, the relative intensity of the various components of these experiences may be sensitive to cultural influences.

Spilka et al. (1996) studied potential cultural influences on the intensity of religious experience components by comparing the judged desirability of various components of reli-

gious experience in one group of religious individuals with the reports of actual experiences in a second group. They uncovered a very high correlation between group means for these components and claimed that this finding provided support for the predicted relation between desirability and experience and therefore for the purported cultural influences on religious experience. However, Spilka et al. examined such influences in an indirect manner. In addition, no differentiation was made between participants of different cultures – religious or otherwise. It would appear to be fruitful to compare groups of people of different cultures, but of the same religion, in order to study the possible influences of culture on religious experiences in a more direct manner.

Religious or mystical experience is a multi-dimensional construct. Stace (1960) listed eight putatively universal qualities of religious experiences: a feeling that all things are part of a whole and that one is part of this unity; a feeling of timelessness and spacelessness; a noetic quality; a sense of joy and happiness; a feeling of the sacred and the holy; a logic defying paradoxical quality; ineffability; and a loss of the sense of self. On the basis of Stace's conceptualization, Hood (1975) developed the Mysticism Scale (M-Scale) to measure these eight phenomenological characteristics of religious experience (paradoxical quality was dropped by Hood and the perception of an inner subjectivity and consciousness within all things was added).

Factor analysis of the M-Scale has uncovered a three-factor solution (Hood et al. 1993). Hood et al. identified the first factor of their three-factor solution with Stace's (1960) extrovertive mysticism, defined as the experience of unity with all and containing two qualities: *unity in diversity* (e.g., "I have had an experience in which I realized the oneness of myself with all things") and *inner subjectivity* (e.g., "I have had an experience in which all things seemed to be conscious"). The second factor was identified with Stace's introvertive mysticism, defined as an experience of self-loss, contained the following three qualities: *unity of ego* (e.g., "I have had an experience in which something greater than myself seemed to absorb me"), *timelessness and spacelessness* (e.g., "I have had an experience which was both timeless and spaceless"), and *ineffability* (e.g., "I have had an experience that is impossible to communicate"). The third factor was identified by Hood et al. as an interpretive factor of religious content and contained the following three qualities: *positive affect* (e.g., "I have experienced profound joy"), *religious holiness* (e.g., "I have had an experience which seemed holy to me"), and *noetic quality* (e.g., "I have had an experience in which a new view of reality was revealed to me"). It should be noted that although Hood et al. (2001) argued that ineffability cannot logically be associated with an interpretive factor which is inherently effable, Stace did associate this quality with the interpretive dimension of religious experience. A recent study of the structure of the M – Scale on a sample of religious Jewish people in Israel (Lazar and Kravetz forthcoming) found support for the Hood three-factor structure. However, the Stace conceptualization which associates ineffability with the interpretive dimension of religious experience was found to fit the data better than the Hood conceptualization described above and will therefore be used in the present study.

Some components of these experiences may be affected by cultural influences in different ways. Stace (1960) claims that the experience of unity with all things is central to religious experience and that this unifying quality of religious experience is independent of the more interpretive quality of religious experience. Therefore, according to the Stace claim of the universality of the feeling of oneness, termed by Hood (1989) as the "unity thesis," extrovertive religious experience which is characterized by the experience of unity

should be relatively independent of socio-cultural differences. On the other hand, the interpretative aspect of religious experience would appear to be more a function of such differences. While the sensitivity of introvertive religious experience to cultural influences cannot be derived directly from Stace's conceptualization, this construct would seem to be more similar to the extrovertive component of religious experience than to the interpretive component. Therefore, measures of interpretive religious experience may be expected to differentiate between different ethnic groups in a more pronounced manner than would measures of introvertive and extrovertive religious experience.

The present study will also investigate in conjunction possible cultural influences on religious motivation which has also been found to be a multi-dimensional construct (Lazar et al. 2002). Differences in motivation for religious behavior between ethnic groups could shed light on the processes underlying the differences in religious experiences that may be uncovered for these groups. According to Ford (1992), immediate conscious experience with a negative or positive valence very often links emotional activation to motivation. Thus, a culture's emphasis on a particular set of goals may be expected to produce an association between religious motives and religious experience for that culture.

The present investigation focused on possible cultural influences on religious experience and religious motivation among individuals living in Israel who all identified themselves as Orthodox Jews but who came from different cultural backgrounds. Much social research in Israel divides the Jewish population into Ashkenazi, i.e. Jews of European or North American descent, and Sephardic, i.e. Jews originating from Arab and Islamic countries such as Morocco, Yemen and Iraq (Smootha 1993). Although many differences between these groups are well documented (Haddad 1984), it should be noted that the majority of immigration to Israel for both the Ashkenazi and the Sephardic Jews was between the mid 40's through the mid 60's of the former century. In addition, most children of religious families attend religious public schools which have a distinct Ashkenazi religious orientation. Therefore, it may be expected that cultural influences on the religious experiences and religious motivation differentiating between these groups will be minor. In comparison, the majority of Ethiopian immigration transpired much more recently (Operation Moses – 1984, Operation Solomon - 1991). Due to the cultural uniqueness of these people, much Israeli social research has recently focused on people from this descent. In a recent ethnographic study of Ethiopian Jews who immigrated to Israel, Schwarz (2001) identified a number of central cultural themes. One such theme is the concept of being together (*abran*) both with regards to kin (*zamad*) and in relation to neighbors (*gworbet*). In addition, Schwarz documents the strong Ethiopian tradition of respect and reserve. Among these immigrants, loud voices, physical abruptness and public expressions of affection are considered as unbecomely behavior for adults, whereas such behavior is common among many Israeli born Jews. Such cultural norms may be relevant to various types of religious experience and religious motivation. If culture influences religious experience, as claimed by Spilka et al. (1996), and religious motivation as suggested here, religious experience and motivation would therefore be expected to differentiate between these ethnic groups.

METHOD

Research Participants

This study's sample consisted of 165 Israelis enrolled in various institutes of higher religious education associated with the Zionist National Religious Party (NRP). In contrast

with the ethnic segregation in *haredi* (ultra-orthodox) institutions, all of the institutes participating in the present investigation are integrated and have a multi-ethnic student body. All of the participants identified themselves as Orthodox Jews. Thirty-two participants (19.4%) were females and 133 participants (80.6%) were male. Twenty-four participants (13.3%) were from Ashkenazi ethnic background (European or North American descent), 101 participants (61.2%) were from Sephardic ethnic background (Moroccan, Yemenite, Iranian and other North African descent), all born in Israel. The 42 (25.5%) research participants of Ethiopian descent were all born in Ethiopia. The age of the research participants ranged from 17 to 29, with an average age of 21.8 years and a standard deviation of 2.4 years.

Measures

Mysticism Scale (M-Scale). This 32-item measure of mystic experience was developed by Hood (1975). Respondents are requested to indicate the extent to which each statement is true of her or his own experiences. The final scoring of each item is from 1 ("definitely not true") to 5 ("definitely true"), with the response category, "I cannot decide," scored as 3. These items are grouped into the following eight four-item groups: *unity in diversity*, *inner subjectivity*, *unity of ego*, *timelessness and spacelessness*, *positive affect*, *religious holiness*, *noetic quality*, and *ineffability*. As described above in the introduction, according to the Stace (1960) conceptualization, which was recently supported on the basis of a sample of religious Jews in Israel (Lazar and Kravetz forthcoming), the M-Scale produces three scores: the first two groups of items form the extrovertive factor of religious experience, the following two groups of items form the introvertive factor of religious experience while the final four groups form the interpretive factor. Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients for the measures of interpretive, extrovertive and introvertive religious experience in the present study were .82, .74, and, .74, respectively. These reliability coefficients are similar to those reported by Hood et al. (2001) for an Iranian sample - .72 for the interpretive scale, .72 for the extrovertive scale, and .64 for the introvertive scale. For an American sample, these reliabilities were .85, .82, and .82, respectively.

Motivation for Religious Behavior Questionnaire-Form A (MRBQ-A). Lazar et al. (2002) developed this 58-item measure of motivation for religious behavior. Respondents first select, from a list of popular religious rituals, those religious rituals that they usually perform. They then indicate the importance of each of the 58 motivational items for their performance of these rituals by choosing one of five response categories, ranging from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (very important). The MRBQ-A consists of the following five scales of religious motivation: *belief-in-divine-order* (e.g. "To be in contact with God," "Out of fear of transgression"), *ethnic identity* (e.g. "It gives me a feeling of belonging to the Jewish people," "Because I belong to the Jewish people"), *social* (e.g. "In order to be esteemed by others," "To be like everyone"), *family* (e.g. "Because it unifies my family," "Because it provides occasions for family gatherings") and *upbringing* (e.g. "Since I was educated to do so," "Since it's a remnant from my childhood"). The Cronbach reliability coefficients found in this study for the measures of reported of motivation were .93, .90, .88, .84, and, .84 respectively. These coefficients of reliability are similar to those reported by Lazar et al. that were .97, .92, .91, .89, and .86 respectively.

Demographic Questions. The research participants responded to questions regarding their age, gender, religious identity (ultra-orthodox, orthodox, traditional, secular), ethnic background (Ashkenazi, Sephardic, Ethiopian), and place of birth.

Procedure

This study was part of a comprehensive investigation of aspects of religious experience of Jewish persons living in Israel. After receiving permission to carry-out the study in various institutes of higher Jewish education, a research assistant approached a senior student in each institute and asked him or her to recruit students who were willing to participate in a study of various aspects of religion. The questionnaires were distributed to the research participants and collected over the next few days by the research assistant.

RESULTS

In order to determine if the various measures of religious experience and religious motivation distinguished between the three ethnic groups as would be expected if culture influences religious experience and motivation, discriminant function analysis was conducted. Discriminant function analysis is a multivariate technique that identifies the combination or combinations of variables that best separate groups.

Individual scores for each of the measures of religious experience were calculated in two stages. In the first stage, for each of the eight components, scores were calculated by averaging responses to the four component-relevant items. Next, scores for each of the three measures of religious experience – interpretive, introvertive and extrovertive - were calculated by averaging the relevant component scores. These computations resulted in measure scores with a potential range of 1 to 5. In a similar manner, scores were calculated for the five measures of religious motivation by averaging relevant item scores. The three religious experience scores and the five religious motivation scores were then submitted to discriminant function analysis. The analysis resulted in one statistically significant discriminant function ($\chi^2 = 39.9$, Wilk's $\lambda = .78$, $df = 16$, $p < .001$) meaning that one particular combination of religious experience and religious motivation scores was able to differentiate between the three ethnic groups. For the total usable sample, 47.3% classified correctly. Equal *a priori* probabilities were assigned to groups, so classification was not influenced by relative sample sizes (Tabachnick and Fidell 1996). The total structure coefficients and group centroids for this function, together with group means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1.

The total structure matrix coefficients reported in Table 1 are the pooled within-groups correlations between the discriminating variables and standardized canonical discriminant functions. For purposes of interpretation these coefficients are preferable over the standardized canonical discriminant coefficients as they clearly indicate the relationship between each discriminant variable and the discriminant function. Standardized canonical discriminant coefficients, on the other hand, are the discriminant variable weights used for calculating discriminant function scores and therefore distribute simultaneous shared discrimination information between the variables (Klecka 1980).

The matrix coefficients in Table 1 indicate that the function that discriminates between the ethnic groups consists of an interpretive religious experience (structure matrix coefficient = 0.72) coupled with religious motivations not based upon family centered goals such as *upbringing* (structure matrix coefficient = -0.53) and *family* (structure matrix coefficient = -0.41). A high score on this function appears to represent a distinctly traditional religious experience of holiness, positive affect, and profound knowledge by individuals whose motivation for religious behavior is not motivated by family, social or ethnic needs. A low score on this function represents a religious experience which is more strongly tied to such needs

Table 1:
Group means and standard deviations
for measures of religious experience and religious motivation,
total structure coefficients and group centroids

	Ashkenazi (N=22)		Oriental (N=101)		Ethiopian (N=42)		Structure Matrix Coefficients
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Introvertive	3.4	.97	3.4	.93	3.3	.61	.08
Extrovertive	3.3	1.16	3.4	.88	3.4	.46	-.09
Interpretive	4.2	.54	4.2	.60	3.7	.65	.72
Belief	3.3	.72	3.4	.70	3.5	.73	-.15
Family	2.6	.98	2.7	1.02	3.2	.89	-.41
Ethnic	3.3	.93	3.4	1.02	3.7	.77	-.29
Social	2.0	.88	2.0	.76	2.3	.83	-.36
Upbringing	2.9	1.10	2.7	1.04	3.4	.91	-.53
Group Centroids	.24		.30		-.85		

while being less of an experience of profound knowledge, positive affect, or holy presence. Examination of the group centroids, which are group means on this function, show that the research participants from an Ashkenazi or Sephardic backgrounds have higher scores on this function in comparison to those from an Ethiopian background.

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated possible cultural influences on measures of religious experience and religious motivation by comparing persons belonging to the same religious belief but coming from different ethnic backgrounds. The results of discriminant function analysis indicate that it is possible to differentiate between individuals coming from different cultural backgrounds on the basis of their religious experiences and religious motivation providing support for Spilka et al.'s (1996) claim to cultural influence on religious experience.

Pronounced differences were found between religious Jews born in Israel, from both from Ashkenazi and Sephardic background, and religious Jews from Ethiopian background whom had recently immigrated to Israel. In particular, the Ethiopian religious experience-motivation complex was less characterized by traditional feelings of a holy presence and more characterized by a family-social-background motivation than was that of the Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews. However, as can be seen from the results of the discriminant analysis, almost no differentiation was made between the Ashkenazi respondents and the Sephardic respondents. This may be due to the fact that almost all of the research participants from these backgrounds were born and grew up in Israel in contrast to the research participants in the Ethiopian group who were all born in Ethiopia and recently immigrated to Israel.

Although the specifics of cultural influences on religious experience and religious motivation were not predicted, a conjectural post-hoc explanation will be offered here. One variable of central importance in the research of cultural differences is individualism – collectivism. Individualism has been defined as a focus on rights above duties, a concern for oneself and

immediate family, an emphasis on personal autonomy and self-fulfillment, and the basing of one's identity on one's personal accomplishment (Hofstede 1980). Collectivism is considered a perception of the individual simply as a component of the social (Triandis 1995). Individualism and collectivism have often been conceptualized as the two poles of a bipolar continuum, in particular when comparing Eastern and Western cultures (Kitayama et al. 1997). The former cultures are assumed to be closer to the collective pole while the latter cultures are assumed to be more individualistic and meta-analysis has, in general, supported these assumed differences in cultural orientation. American culture has been found to be the most individualistic of all cultures investigated. Small differences in individualism have been found between American culture and European culture, whereas the greatest effect size has been found when comparing African countries and Middle-East countries with America (Oyserman, Coon, and Kemmelmeier 2002).

Individualism – collectivism has been shown to be related to such basic psychological functioning as self-concept and self-esteem, well-being and emotion, attribution style, relationship closeness and communication styles (Oyserman et al. 2002). On this basis, it may be expected that individuals from an Ethiopian background, assumed to be high in collectivism, would report higher levels of motivation for collectivistic relevant motives – e. g. family, social, and upbringing — than would individuals of other cultural backgrounds, assumed to be more individualistic. An individualistic culture may stress the cognitive aspects of experience more so than a collectivistic culture, thus influencing cognitive components such as the ineffable and noetic quality of religious experience (components of the interpretive religious experience), but not influencing the more experiential components such as introvertive and extrovertive experience. It would be useful to perform future investigations of the relation between individualism and religious experience and religious motivation using a direct assessment of individualism – collectivism.

The results uncovered here also give support to Stace's (1960) claim as to the centrality and universality of the unifying quality of religious experience. This component of religious experience, as exemplified by the extrovertive scale, was not found to differentiate between individuals of different cultural backgrounds, and is apparently not affected by cultural influences.

The results presented here provide support for a cultural influence on important religious variables such as religious motivation and the interpretive component of religious experience. Future research should attempt to identify specific cultural influences, on these variables as well as other religious variables such as religious commitment. In addition, further investigations of religious persons belonging to the same faith, other than Judaism, but coming from different cultural backgrounds may provide more substantial support for the cultural influence on these variables.

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